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Paramilitary unit plans Asia raid to save POWs

By Susan Katz
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A group calling itself Private Delta Force is planning to rescue what it believes are U.S. prisoners of war in Southeast Asia, its leader said.

The 20-member force has been training with live ammunition, booby traps and pyrotechnics at a camp near Breezewood, Pa., for a likely raid in Laos sometime before Easter.

The group's mission is based on intelligence reports from its contacts in Southeast Asia, according to the group's leader, who would not allow his name to be used.

"We would penetrate Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam by 50 kilometers, spend four hours on the ground and rescue live POWs," he said.

Ted Sampley, deputy national coordinator for the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition, is not a member of the paramilitary group, but said he knows the people involved.

"They're serious as rabies," Mr. Sampley said.

But retired Army Col. Chuck Allen, who headed the Project Delta commando force in Vietnam, is not enthusiastic about Private Delta Force.

"That whole concept is looked at by professionals as a joke," Col. Allen said.

"I don't think they could rescue a sack of potatoes. It's just a plan to put money into someone's pocket," he said. "You can't train people to do that sort of thing without government support."

Col. Allen also said such a rescue mission would be illegal.

"You don't just run across the border with a gun. It sets back the advances we're making in the POW issue," he said. "In the past, Bo Gritz [who organized an unsuccessful rescue mission] has set back the process with his activities. The government has taken a lot of steps toward resolving this issue. The process is so fragile, it's so easy to disrupt it. It's better to support what the government is doing."

The official U.S. position, according to a State Department spokesman, is that while "there is no definitive proof of live POWs, we proceed on the assumption that there might be."

"All leads are assiduously followed up," the spokesman said. "We don't regard such efforts [as Private Delta Force] as helpful. The best way to deal with the program is through government contacts."

Members of Private Delta Force remain undaunted.

Don Mallen, a former Marine who lives in

Pennsylvania, said he is a member of the group.

"I will follow them if asked," Mr. Mallen said. "I would participate in a project if I thought it would be successful."

"We have a wealth of material from the U.S. and other forces on technique," Mr. Mallen said. "We have all the physical capabilities. We have an airlift capability. No option is closed to us."

The group's leader said the members are mostly former and active duty Special Forces operatives. The group takes its name from

Delta Force, the Army commando force based in Fort Bragg, N.C.

"We are definitely on a mission," the leader said. "The raid date depends on what's appropriate, but it will have to be done by Easter."

Members were recruited by word of mouth and by advertisements in veterans' newsletters. The team is looking for about 70 more members.

Private Delta Force claims to have information on different types of POW situations.

"We have intelligence that multiple caves are being used to house POWs," the group leader said. "One cave, five guys. Each cave has a T-96 [tank] backed into the mouth of the cave. Private Delta Force is practicing that type of rescue."

Those prisoners could be in feeble condition, he said, but another group of prisoners might be healthier. "We had a report from a Haitian sailor on leave in Vietnam that he saw three bearded Caucasians with a Vietnamese guard doing road work. The guard tried to chase the Haitian away. One Caucasian yelled out his name. The guard shot at the Haitian. He ran and hid, then released this report."

"In that type of rescue, we may want our Asian contact there. It could be a boat rescue. We would send in a team of six, and meet with a resistance group to guide us."

Private Delta Force received a report in March 1985 that a Laotian liberation soldier saw two camps in February, the leader said. "There were 51 in one camp, 32 in the other. One was along the Viet-Laos border. He identified three or four Americans."

Mr. Sampley, who was with the Army Special Forces, said that the hardest part of any rescue would be getting out. "It would be nearly impossible to walk out of there, once you've stirred up that hornet's nest. You couldn't go down the roads. It's impossible unless you've got a quick means of getting out."

Nevertheless, he said, Private Delta Force could succeed. "They've got their mess together, and they've got good intelligence. I hope they do well."

Information on Private Delta Force has reached Capitol Hill. "We are aware of the existence of the organization," said Michael Sheehan, an aide to Alabama Republican Sen. Jeremiah Denton. The matter has been referred to the Senate subcommittee on security and terrorism, Mr. Sheehan said.

The government is "resolutely opposed" to the mission of Private Delta Force, said Lt. Col. Arnold Williams at the Pentagon. "Cross-border forays conducted by private U.S. citizens are extremely harmful to our efforts to resolve the POW/MIA issue."

"I don't care about the U.S. government response," said the project's leader. "If the situation presented itself, we would be ready in two weeks."

Interest in the POW/MIA issue has increased in recent months, with three separate events helping to fuel the controversy.

The release of the movie "Rambo: First Blood Part II," in which Sylvester Stallone portrays a Vietnam veteran who single-handedly rescues several POWs, renewed nationwide interest in the issue.

In mid-November, two Vietnam veterans — Maj. Mark A. Smith and Capt. Melvin C. McIntire — filed a class action suit against President Reagan and the federal government, charging that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency covered up information and destroyed proof of Americans held captive in Southeast Asia.

In addition, published accounts of comments former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane made at an off-the-record meeting indicated that he believed it is possible that Americans were being held against their will in Southeast Asia.